

# **Commencement Address to the Class of 2010**

**Huston-Tillotson University**

**Austin, Texas**

**May 8, 2010**

Thank:

- President Earvin for your very kind introduction, and greetings to Houston-Tillotson Class of 2010. I appreciate the opportunity to be with you to share this special day in your lives and in the life of this great university.
- Parents – They will continue to need your support and encouragement as they now venture off to join the American work force, attend graduate school, or serve in the Armed Forces or other service organizations.
- Families and friends of the Class of 2010... for unwavering support provided to these young men and women on the verge of taking their place in the world as the most recent graduates of this great institution.

My baby girl, Kelly, now an accomplished plastic surgeon and one of my chief mentors and counselors gave me wise advice for my address to you today – short, not too serious, tell them times will be tough, but it's worth it!

Before the Civil War, the opportunities for an education for most African-Americans, much less a higher education, were few. Back in 1952, when Samuel Huston and Tillotson Colleges came together to form this great learning institution, the world ahead and our understanding of the world beyond were very different than our view is today.

On March 7, 1965 on a bridge entering Selma, Alabama, 600 civil rights marchers were attacked and brutally beaten simply because they were marching for their own basic human rights. At the head of that march across the Edmund-Pettus Bridge was John Lewis, today a member of the Georgia Congressional delegation. Eight days after the attack, President Lyndon B. Johnson came before a joint session of Congress to propose the historic *Voting Rights Act*.

Today, Congressman Lewis likes to say that on the end of the bridge opposite from the police who attacked the marchers; on that other end is President Barack Obama. I understand his view, but I have another. I believe on the other side of that bridge is...you. For it is your generation

that will have the chance – if not the right – to take the hard-won advantages you have inherited from my generation to fruition. Embodied in you are the hopes and dreams and aspirations of a truly united America. It is only as one nation that we will be able to face and conquer the challenges that science and technology have in store for us.

As you ponder your place in the future, I suggest you give some consideration to a period of public service. While the quest for titles and great wealth are always noble goals, I have found there to be no more fulfilling achievement than to follow a passion and in so doing make life better for someone else. My mom and dad were teachers in segregated South Carolina – yet each day they devoted every ounce of their being to equipping young boys and girls to succeed in the world we would enter and to believe that we could do anything we wanted as long as we were willing to work hard, and never shy away from a challenge for fear of failure. They taught us the critical importance of honesty and faith.

Since last July, I have had the privilege of leading the government agency whose charter is as expansive as it is essential to modern life -- the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). As we stand here today, more than 200 miles above us six astronauts are working night and day aboard the International Space Station. I wonder how many of you

knew we even had a space station up there? Astronauts from America, Russia, and Japan, all part of a sixteen-nation global partnership are working on research that can extend human presence in our solar system, develop new methods of delivering medicines to cancer patients, and other technologies that can both protect the lives of astronauts on other space missions but also protect firemen and first responders.

An average day at NASA may include analyzing the data that streams down from dozens of Earth-circling satellites, spacecraft that are giving us new understanding of our universe, our planet's climate, or the composition of our oceans and air. Farther out from Earth, we are compiling new data on the sun, on the nature of newly discovered water on the Moon, and how today's cold and arid Mars was once wet and warm, to the tune of ancient oceans as deep and vast as those we know of today on Earth. Answering the riddle of what happened to the great warm water seas of Mars may help us identify and understand the changes that even now are happening here.

From our designer's laboratories at NASA field centers across America we are tooling up for a new era in space technology development. It has been a generation since we last developed and flew a heavy lift

launch vehicle, a booster capable of lifting sections of interplanetary ships, or large supplies to the space station, or assemble new space telescopes.

President Obama has tasked us with designing such a new vehicle and to do it by 2015. He has set as our next destinations in space new deep space vehicles capable of going beyond the moon in the decades ahead. He has challenged us to send a crew of astronauts to rendezvous with an asteroid and to make the first direct observations of their compositions. The study of such near Earth objects may unlock new knowledge that can be used to deflect those that may one day threaten Earth.

We will need new capabilities in robotic spacecraft that can scout possible future landing sites for astronauts or settlements. Speaking of robots, NASA is about to dispatch to the station a new type of humanoid robot to work alongside space station crews. Called Robotnaut 2 or R2, and developed through a Space Act Agreement between NASA and General Motors, this human-like companion is also being prepared for work on the assembly lines in Detroit, making the manufacture of cars safer and more efficient.

President Obama has also challenged NASA to facilitate the development of a new commercial space industry, one capable of sending

astronauts routinely to the ISS. NASA will partner with this new industry of space taxis and lease vehicles that will make it possible in the years ahead for the average person to fly to space and do research or relaxation. We will need to find new exotic propulsion systems that can shrink the transit time from Earth to deep space from months and years to days and weeks. And while enroute to Mars, we will need to develop ways to protect astronauts from the solar radiation that, as of now, would be fatal to human astronaut crews. These are just some of the challenges that await NASA and our industry partners in the years ahead in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

What, you may ask, has any of this to do with me? The answer is simple: every single one of these activities requires a skilled and educated workforce and you can be a part of that workforce. Your parents and I have faith in you, but you must have faith in yourselves. What you achieve today can open the doors to exploration and discovery for tomorrow, but your education mustn't end when you leave here today. Accept the challenge and responsibility of leadership in whatever you choose as your profession. If you are wise, you will take what you've learned here at HT and make it inform your everyday life, whether it be for another degree or for your place in the great American future. I know you've heard this

before, but it really is true; there's no limit to what you can do. The only question is do you want to do it – do you want to make a difference?

As a Marine I was taught three Core Values – emblazoned into my character:

- Honor
- Courage
- Commitment

Through the years, I have also learned the value of humility. This is captured so well in a version of the “Prayers of the People” from the *Book of Common Prayer* used in the services of my Episcopal Church:

*“When we are too well pleased with ourselves; when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little; when we arrive safely because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*- Challenge us to serve more!*

*When with the abundance of things we possess we have lost our thirst for the Waters of Life; having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity; and in our efforts to build a new Earth; we have allowed our vision of the new heaven to dim.*

*- Challenge us to give more!*

*And to dare more boldly - to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask you push back the horizons of our hopes, and to push us into the future with strength, courage, hope and love.*

*- Challenge us to love more!"*

I'll leave you with the thoughts of a 12-year-old African boy, Nkosi Johnson (- 2001)

- ***Do all you can***
- ***With what you have***
- ***In the time that you have***
- ***In the place that you are***

**Live the words of Nkosi – FOLLOW YOUR PASSION**

Thank you for the honor of sharing this day with you. God Bless you all and may God always bless the United States of America.



